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Developments in Indochina

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[REDACTED] Phnom Penh's loosely organized effort to encourage large-scale rallying continues to make little progress. The effort is bogged down in political gamesmanship and is affected both by the adverse military situation and the government's failure to provide little incentive for leaving the insurgent cause.

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The first plenary session of the Joint Central Commission to Implement the Agreement was held on 23 November, after two months of Communist foot-dragging. The Communists are pressing for a reduction in government forces in order to achieve a military balance in the two capitals of Vientiane and Luang Prabang.

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President Thieu has begun one of the most extensive government and military shakeups in several years. He is also moving to resolve a power struggle centering around his two closest aides. On the military front, both Saigon and the Communists continue to raise the military ante in the highlands and the region north of Saigon.

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Ralliers in Review

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Phnom Penh's "rally-the-nation" program--a loosely organized effort to encourage large-scale rallying--is still making little progress. On the political side, the program has become something of a contest in which many of Phnom Penh's politicians--who see it as a path toward a peace settlement--believe they must demonstrate their ability to attract ralliers. Virtually every well-known politician in the capital claims to have large groups of insurgents willing to rally to him personally, including Prime Minister In Tam and High Political Council member Cheng Heng.

Besides trying to make political hay out of the program, some officials also view it as a means of improving their financial and bureaucratic positions. Perhaps the most notorious offender in this regard was the former minister of ralliers, General Lon Non, who claimed fake ralliers, staged fake ceremonies, and submitted fake budget requests. Such practices have made it difficult for rallier resettlement proposals to obtain the necessary high-level approvals in the government.

The deterioration in the military situation over the past few months has also had an adverse effect on the program. A major rallier resettlement area at Tram Khnar, 30 miles southwest of Phnom Penh, fell to the Khmer Communists last month. The fall of other positions and the contraction of the capital's defense perimeter have further reduced the "cross over" points for potential ralliers. Furthermore, the uncertainties over the Cambodian Army's ability to protect the territory it now holds raises psychological barriers

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to rallying. The number of ralliers speaks for itself: since May only 692 individuals have left Communist ranks.

Another problem stems from the government's failure to offer any incentive for rallying. At present, the only assistance provided ralliers is the food and lodging furnished by the army during the debriefing period. Even the sums offered for weapons brought over are substantially lower than black market prices. Once they are debriefed, the ralliers are either inducted into the army, enrolled in local refugee programs, or allowed to seek refuge with relatives or friends. Only a few are passed along to the government agency that is ostensibly responsible for ralliers, the Ministry of National Concord. This ministry is so poorly staffed and financed that it can do little more than help a handful of the ralliers find jobs.

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LAOS

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Laos: A Step Forward

Another milestone in the long road toward the formation of a new coalition government in Laos was reached last week. The first plenary session of the Joint Central Commission to Implement the Agreement met on 23 November after two months of Communist foot-dragging. The Communists had refused to hold a formal session of the commission until they were satisfied with security and housekeeping arrangements. Once agreement was reached to convene, however, the Communists, unlike their Vientiane counterparts, came prepared with an agenda and a set of priorities. In a tough opening address, Communist spokesman Soth Phetrasy made it clear that there could be no coalition government until both Vientiane and Luang Prabang are neutralized--in effect demanding that government forces be reduced to the number of Communist troops currently stationed in the two capitals.

Although these terms are spelled out in the peace agreement, Prime Minister Souvanna will have his work cut out for him in convincing the Lao generals to comply. The generals, who are reluctant to face up to the implications of the Laos settlement, still regard the Communist troops in Vientiane and Luang Prabang as interlopers. While the army claims it recognizes the need to move some of its garrisons away from the comfortable capital environment, it seems to be in no hurry.

In addition to achieving a military balance in the two capitals, the Communists are also pushing for joint police patrols, a total cease-fire, an exchange of prisoner-of-war information, and the "definitive end" to all "foreign aviation activities." Despite the progress made to date, this formidable series of obstacles appears to rule out the early formation of a new government.

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SOUTH VIETNAM

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Shakeup in Saigon

In the past few weeks, President Thieu has begun one of the most extensive government and military shakeups in several years. One military region commander, several regional staff officers, five new division commanders, at least nine new province chiefs, and several cabinet ministers have been appointed. Extensive changes have been announced in the military command structure in Military Regions 2, 3, and 4, and there are indications that further changes are still to come.

The shakeup was triggered chiefly by Thieu's disappointment with the lack of aggressiveness of the officials involved. Many of the changes occurred in the key region north of Saigon, where the government has been unable to recapture significant territory or reduce the Communist threat substantially. Other changes, such as those in the highlands, were the result of the Communist success in eroding the government hold at several points. The shakeup may also be part of an effort by Thieu to prepare for the possibility of heavier fighting in the months to come. Last year, he waited until several weeks after the Communists had launched their offensive before removing ineffective commanders.

Thieu reportedly is also moving to resolve a power struggle within the government centering around his two closest aides. Presidential assistant Nguyen Van Ngan apparently will be warned not to use the machinery of the government's Democracy Party to interfere with the military or the bureaucracy. Ngan has been using the party in his personal conflict with Information Commissioner Hoang Duc Nha, and the party's activities in the provinces had led some senior military men to complain that it was interfering in their affairs. Thieu has also rejected a suggestion by Ngan

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and a group of pro-government legislators that responsibility for information activities overseas should be transferred from Nha's Information Commission to the Foreign Ministry.

These moves will neither end the squabbling between Nha and Ngan nor satisfy the country's senior military leaders, who would like to see both men restrained or even fired. For now, however, Thieu remains in close and friendly contact with Nha, and he apparently intends to let Ngan continue his party work.

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The Game Gets Rougher

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Both Saigon and the Communists continue to raise the military ante in the highlands and in the region north of Saigon. South Vietnamese aircraft struck hard at major Communist command complexes in the border provinces north of the capital for the second time last week. Moreover, commanders in Military Regions 2 and 3 plan to step up ground actions against Communist bases and troop concentrations north of Saigon and in the highlands.

The government's willingness to resort to large-scale military action undoubtedly reflects its growing concern over recent Communist moves in these areas. North Vietnamese troops in Quang Duc Province have heavily fortified their recent gains along Route 14 and have given every indication that they are as determined to hold on to the newly captured terrain as the government is to retake it.

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Saigon's moves in both regions are being watched closely by the Communists, who seem well aware of the government's intentions.

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[REDACTED] It seems likely that, should the government follow through with the transfer of most of its main force units to the highlands from Binh Dinh and Phu Yen provinces, the Communists would be aware of its weakened defenses in these areas.

There are still no indications that the Communists are moving to take advantage of such weak points, however. Also, government actions have not provoked the sort of military retaliation triggered by earlier strikes. Although the Communists will doubtless strongly oppose such government operations, they may choose to husband their resources rather than engage in tit-for-tat exchanges with the South Vietnamese.

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